

19 THE APPEAL OF THE PROTESTANT REVOLT

Only a hundred years before Luther, John Huss had made similar charges against the Church. Huss was burned at the stake, but Luther died of natural causes. Huss did not destroy the religious unity of Europe, but Luther divided it into Protestant and Catholic camps. What had happened during those hundred years to make Luther successful where Huss had failed?

Part of the explanation can be found in the weakening of Church authority. Late in the thirteenth century, kings and princes began to resist papal interference in their political and economic activities. Some rulers were able to gain control of the Church in their territories. At the same time, the clergy was growing increasingly worldly and fond of luxury. Many Europeans began to question their Church. They became less willing to recognize its divine right to dictate their moral values.

However, some of Luther's success resulted from the popularity of his ideas and those of other Protestant reformers. The landowning nobility, for example, resented the Church's vast holdings within their territories. And the reformers had all attacked the right of the Church to own property. Some had gone so far as to say that the Church should be under the control of the state. Thus, the nobility saw the possibility of taking the Church's land if the Church were successfully challenged. The middle class wanted freedom from the restrictions the Church put upon their commercial interests. And the peasants, oppressed by taxes and debts, wanted the chance for dignity that Luther, himself a peasant, seemed to offer. These groups defended the reformers and assured their success. From the evidence in Reading 19, you should be able to develop some hypotheses about the appeal of Protestantism in the sixteenth century. Keep the following questions in mind as you examine the evidence in the readings.

1. For what reasons did Luther appeal to the German nobles? How did his ideas reflect recent political changes in Europe?
2. What were the major complaints of the peasants? Why were they attracted to Protestant ideas?
3. To what class would Calvin's ideas most appeal? On what do you base your answer?

Luther's Address to the German Nobility

Luther's protest against indulgences became a protest against the Church. When Luther defended his views publicly in 1519, he stated that the laws of the Church were not necessarily God's laws. The Bible alone contained the proper guides for Christians. In 1520 Luther published three pamphlets, including his Address to the German Nobility. In 1521 he was excommunicated.

It is not out of mere arrogance and stubbornness that I, one poor and insignificant man, have decided to appeal to your lordships. The distress and misery which oppress all the ranks of Christendom, especially in Germany, have made not only me but everybody cry aloud for help.

Those who support the authority of the pope have built three "walls" of belief to protect the Church from reform. In the first place, when kings and princes have asked them to reform, they have stated that the secular rulers have no power over the spiritual rulers—that, on the contrary, the spiritual power is above the secular rulers. Secondly, when some have used the Holy Scriptures to call for reform, they said "No one but the pope can interpret the Scriptures." And thirdly, when a council of the Church has called for reform, they invented the idea that no one but the pope can call a council.

Let us, then, attack the first wall.

The defenders of the Church maintain that the pope, bishops, priests, and monks should be called "the spiritual class," while princes, lords, artisans, and peasants make up the "temporal class." Then they affirm that spiritual authorities are superior to temporal authorities. But do not be afraid of this claim. All Christians are truly members of the spiritual class, and there is no difference between us, except for the office we hold. As St. Paul says, in Corinthians I, Chapter 12, we are all one body in Christ. Each of us has a particular task to perform as the various parts of the body perform particular functions.

Therefore, a priest should be nothing in Christendom but a man with a particular function. We see, then, that all those we call churchmen, be they priests, bishops, or popes, are not different from or higher than other Christians, except insofar as they have the responsibility and the honor of preaching the word of God and giving man the sacraments.

Now let us look at the doctrine that states the temporal authorities have no power over the spiritual. That is like saying that the hand shall do nothing to help the eye, despite the fact that it is severely injured. I say that since God has given the temporal power the responsibility

to punish the wicked and protect the good, we must let it perform its task regardless of whether or not it must punish popes, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, or whatever.

What is the use of those who are called "cardinals"? I will tell you. In Italy and Germany there are many rich convents, endowments, and tracts of land belonging to the Church. The best way of getting these into the hands of the pope in Rome is to create cardinals and give them these rich holdings. That is why Italy is almost a desert now: The convents are destroyed, the Church lands consumed, the revenues of all the churches drawn to Rome. Why? Because the cardinals must have all the wealth.

Now that Italy is sucked dry, they come to Germany. We shall soon see Germany in the same state as Italy. Now this devilish state of things is not only open robbery and deceit, but it is destroying the very life and soul of Christianity. Therefore, we must use all of our diligence to ward off this destruction. Let us begin with the pope and cardinals—we cannot find worse ones. If we rightly hang thieves and behead robbers, why do we leave the greed of Rome unpunished? Rome is the greatest thief and robber that has ever appeared on earth or ever will; and all in the holy name of the Church.

The Declaration of the Peasants

The peasants of sixteenth-century Germany, though in many cases no longer serfs, were still heavily taxed and deprived of their common pastures and woods. When a peasants' war broke out in Germany in 1524, the peasants drew up a declaration of grievances. Excerpts from that declaration follow.

First, it is our humble desire that in the future we, the peasants, should have the power to choose and appoint the pastor of our own community, and that we should have the right to depose him if he should conduct himself improperly. The pastor we choose should teach us the gospel pure and simple, without adding any doctrine or ordinance made by man.

Second, as a just tithe is called for in both the Old and New Testaments, we are ready and willing to pay a fair tithe in grain. From this tithe will come the salary of the pastor which the community will establish. What remains should be given to care for the poor.

Third, it has been the custom until now for men to hold us as if we were their own property, which is pitiable enough since Christ has delivered and redeemed us all, lowly as well as great. Accordingly, it is consistent with the Scriptures that we should be free. Not that we



From this picture, how would you describe the lives of the German peasants in Luther's time? What do you think these people might have wanted from the Protestant revolt?

wish to be absolutely free under no authority. God teaches us that we should not lead a disorderly life. But He has not commanded us to obey the authorities except as we should obey the word of God; that is, we should be humble toward everyone, powerful or not. We are thus ready to obey our authorities in all things becoming to a Christian. But we take it for granted that you will release us from serfdom as true Christians, unless it can be shown in the gospel that we are serfs.

Our sixth complaint is in regard to the excessive services which are demanded of us and which are increased from day to day. We ask that

this matter be properly looked into so that we shall not continue to be oppressed in this way.

Seventh, the lord should no longer try to force more services on the peasant than are provided for in the contract between peasant and lord, unless the lord will make an additional payment.

In the eighth place, we are greatly burdened by small holdings which cannot support the rent that is due from them. We ask that the lords fix a just rent, so that the peasant shall not work for nothing.

Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Calvin was a French theologian who had accepted many of Luther's teachings. When he openly denounced the Church and papal authority, he was threatened with persecution and so he fled to Switzerland. There, Calvin established a church-run state, a theocracy. The following excerpts from the Institutes of the Christian Religion present Calvin's views on economic practices.

The Scriptures teach us about how we should use our earthly blessings. There are two kinds of goods which God has given us. The first are those necessities we must have to live on earth before passing to our heavenly reward. Second, in addition to the goods we must have in order to live, we obtain goods which we use primarily for our own pleasure. Whether the goods we obtain are for necessities or for pleasure, we must use them in moderation. This the Lord teaches us in the Scriptures when He states that life on earth is like a pilgrimage. Christians travel through this life on their way to God's heavenly kingdom. If we are only passing through life on earth to eternal life in heaven, we ought to make use of earth's blessings to assist us in our journey.

We state the principle, then, that we ought to use God's earthly gifts, so long as we use them for the same purposes for which God created them. After all, He created them for our benefit and not for our injury. Moreover, He has provided these gifts for more than existence; He has created them for our pleasure and delight, as well.

Let us discard that inhuman philosophy which states that we should use God's gifts for only those things that are necessary in order to live. In the first place, this philosophy deprives us of the lawful enjoyment of the Divine gifts. Secondly, this philosophy turns man into a senseless block. We should, therefore, use goods for pleasure, but we must oppose extravagant use of these goods to satisfy the pleasures of the flesh.